

10 gold bars seized at Dhaka airport

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

Customs officials recovered 10 gold bars, worth around Tk five crore, at Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport in the capital last night.

On Information, a preventive team of Dhaka customs house searched a Biman Bangladesh Airlines flight that landed at the airport from Singapore and found the gold bars, each weighing 1kg, hidden beneath a passenger seat, said Assistant Commissioner Rezaul Karim.

No one was arrested in this connection, he added.

Afghan officials optimistic Taliban peace talks 'within weeks'

AFP, Kabul

Afghan officials voiced optimism yesterday that Taliban peace talks would resume "within weeks" even after the insurgents rebuffed calls for dialogue, with analysts dismissing their seemingly tough stance as a bargaining ploy.

Talks brokered by a four-country group were expected to start in early March, but the Taliban on Saturday stressed longstanding preconditions for dialogue including the departure of foreign troops from Afghanistan.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani yesterday said he was "hopeful" about peace talks aimed at ending the Taliban's 14-year insurgency, imploring the militant group to join the negotiating table.

"I say to the Taliban that you face a big historic test -- either you stand with your countrymen or with the opposition," Ghani said in an address to the Afghan parliament.

"Peace is the only way forward." Delegates from Afghanistan, China, Pakistan and the United States met in Kabul late February for a fourth round of talks aimed at reviving the nascent peace process, which stalled last summer.

The Taliban, who have stepped up their nationwide insurgency, on Saturday bluntly rejected their overtures, saying "talks will yield no results".

Khaleda Zia, Tarique

FROM PAGE 16

nomination papers on Wednesday and submitted those to returning officer Nazrul Islam Khan on Friday. "We scrutinised the nomination papers. Today [Sunday] is the last day for withdrawing nomination papers," said Sircar.

As none of them withdrew their nomination papers, he said, they have been declared elected unopposed.

In the previous council held in 2009, Khaleda was elected chairperson unopposed while Tarique was made senior vice-chairman.

She has been serving as the party chief since 1984.

This time, the party brought a change in the charter, according to which an election commission will be formed to supervise elections to the top two posts.

However, party insiders said the new provision would bring no change in the party in the absence of democratic practices.

Elections will not even take place to pick candidates for other posts of the executive committee, including the post of secretary general, as councillors of the party will give absolute power to the BNP chief at the council to form the committee, said a standing committee member.

Lawmaker's son

FROM PAGE 16

as the media ran reports on Rony's involvement, it created a huge public outcry.

The charge sheet said Rony along with his friends drank alcohol and beer worth Tk 95,000 at Pan Pacific Sonargaon Hotel till the small hours of the day of the shooting.

They went to Moghbazar in the SUV to drop Jahangir. As they were returning, the vehicle got stuck in traffic jam in front of the LMG Tower for four to five minutes, read the charge sheet.

Rony, who was smoking at that time, lowered the window of the vehicle and fired four to five shots at random, hitting rickshaw-puller Abdul Hakim and auto-rickshaw driver Yakub Ali. The two later died at Dhaka Medical College Hospital.

The vehicle sped away immediately after the incident. However, police identified it from footage of CCTV cameras installed on a nearby building.

Rony was arrested afterwards. His driver Imran Fakir was dropped from the charge sheet as his involvement in the killing was not found.

Later on, Rony admitted to opening fire on people at the scene, claimed police.

OIC moves to help Palestine

Finalises draft resolution containing concrete steps

DIPLOMATIC CORRESPONDENT

The Organisation of the Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has finalised a draft resolution containing concrete steps its member countries will take to help Palestine.

The Resolution on Palestine and Al Quds was confirmed at the two-day Fifth Extra-Ordinary OIC Summit that began in the Indonesian capital Jakarta yesterday.

The document, along with the Jakarta Declaration, is likely to be adopted by the OIC today.

The special summit was convened at the request of the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to discuss the situation in the "occupied Palestinian territories" after Israel imposed restrictions on the entry of

Palestinian devotees to the contested religious site of Al-Quds Al-Sharif.

Foreign Minister AH Mahmood Ali, who is leading the Bangladesh delegation there, attended the Ministerial Preparatory Meeting that finalised the draft resolution and the declaration for adoption by the heads of delegations.

On the sidelines of the summit, the foreign minister met his counterparts from Saudi Arabia, Palestine and the United Arab Emirates, and the OIC secretary general.

More than 500 delegates from the 49 OIC member states, four representatives from the Quartet on the Middle East (United States, Russia, United Nations and European Union), five UN Security Council representatives, and three observer countries are attending the summit.

Little to show for in Boko Haram-IS partnership: analysts

AFP, Lagos

When Boko Haram pledged allegiance to the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria last year, there were fears the deadly insurgency in northeast Nigeria would take on an international dimension.

The world's deadliest designated terrorist organisations -- notorious for the indiscriminate slaughter of tens of thousands of people -- were now officially linked.

Speculation and concern mounted about a potential influx of foreign fighters to the countries surrounding Lake Chad and an escalation of a previously localised conflict.

But 12 months on that hasn't happened. If anything, Boko Haram appears a considerably weaker force and apparently in disarray after a year-long military counter-offensive.

Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau has only been heard from twice since his audio message published on March 7, 2015 pledging an oath to his IS counterpart Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

Nigeria's army has since then increasingly claimed crushing blows against the militants and their strongholds plus the liberation of thousands living under Boko Haram control.

This week, dozens of rebels reportedly surrendered because of hunger. Nigeria now wants many of the two

million people internally displaced by the conflict to return home.

Many analysts have long viewed the announced tie-up as propaganda for both sides. Boko Haram was at the time struggling against regional forces and IS suffering setbacks to its territorial ambitions.

"Nothing has changed in the Boko Haram camp since Shekau's declaration," Nigerian security analyst Abdullahi Bawa Wase told AFP.

"It has failed to bring in IS fighters. It has not attracted IS weapons and cash, which many feared would happen."

"On the contrary, Boko Haram is weaker than it was before the declaration, which is evident from the drastic drop in deadly attacks. Even the rate of suicide bombings has slowed."

A Nigerian security source said IS was "only a marketing label which Boko Haram wants to use to deceptively project itself as a formidable terrorist group".

Shekau's declaration and the subsequent re-branding of Boko Haram as "Islamic State West Africa Province" or ISWAP caused a reported rift in the Boko Haram hierarchy.

Few, if any, wanted to go against his word but dissenters have reportedly explored closer ties with other jihadi groups in the wider Sahel region.

Two years on, MH370 kin want search extended

AFP, Kuala Lumpur

Families devastated by the loss of flight MH370 vowed yesterday never to quit fighting for answers in the aviation mystery and said the huge search for the Malaysia Airlines plane should continue until something is found.

Families gathered for a poignant ceremony in Kuala Lumpur ahead of Tuesday's second anniversary of the jet's disappearance and to argue for an expansion of the search if the current area being scoured comes up empty.

"We are fighting to search on because our loved ones are not home yet. So how can we say it's the end?" said Jacquita Gonzales, wife of flight steward Patrick Gomes.

The unprecedented Australian-led hunt for wreckage from the Boeing 777 is expected to finish its high-tech scanning of a designated swathe of seafloor in the remote Indian Ocean by July.

Australian, Malaysian and Chinese authorities plan to end the search -- projected to cost up to \$130 million -- at that point if no compelling new leads emerge.

A piece of the plane washed up on the French-held island of La Reunion last year, and new debris that is yet to be confirmed as from MH370 was found on a Mozambique beach last week.

But the finds came thousands of kilometres from the suspected crash zone and have yielded no clues.

In one of aviation's greatest enigmas, the plane inexplicably vanished during an overnight flight from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing, carrying 239 passengers and crew.

Citing imprecise satellite data, search authorities believe it flew for hours to the remote southern Indian Ocean and went down.

Many relatives remain unconvinced

that authorities are searching in the right place.

"If they have exhausted one particular line of inquiry, that doesn't mean other areas may not come up with something. Just sit down and ask, 'OK, what next?'" said K.S. Narendran, an Indian national whose wife Chandrika was aboard.

Authorities hope to detect debris far down in the ocean depths and eventually recover and analyse the black boxes for clues.

Martin Dolan, chief commissioner of the Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB) and head of the challenging operation, told AFP last week he remained "very hopeful" something can be found before the 120,000-square-kilometre (46,000-square-mile) search zone is fully scanned.

Many next-of-kin accuse the airline and Malaysian government of letting the plane slip away through a bungled response and covering up what caused the disappearance.

Some also allege Malaysia wants to stop searching to prevent embarrassing information from emerging, which the airline and government strongly deny.

Yesterday's ceremony included prayers, musical performances and the release of 240 white balloons, one for each passenger and another for the plane.

Relatives say acceptance of their unexplained loss remains impossible two years on.

"We don't have anything to accept. We still know nothing and we are all in limbo. If anything I am worse than before," said Grace Nathan, a Malaysian attorney who lost her mother.

Added Gonzales: "We will fight on to make sure that we get the truth of exactly what happened to all of them. We will not give up."

Abducted Lagos schoolgirls rescued: police

AFP, Lagos

Three secondary school students who were kidnapped from their school in Nigeria's biggest city, Lagos, have been found, police told AFP yesterday.

"We have rescued the three girls in the early hours of today (Sunday)... in Igbokuta village," said Lagos State police spokeswoman Dolapo Badmus.

"The girls are in good condition. Some of the suspected kidnappers were arrested when our policemen stormed the location."

The three girls were seized from a dormitory last Monday at the Babington Macaulay Junior Seminary School in the eastern suburb of Ikorodu.

The abduction sparked a massive search for the teenagers and the prompted the state government to tighten security at schools across the megacity, which is home to some 20 million people.

Igbokuta village is some 15 kilometres from the school and about 25 kilometres from Ikorodu.

Police have previously refused to comment on local media reports of demands for a 200-million-naira (nearly \$1 million, 900,000-euro) ransom.

Badmus said investigations were continuing and did not rule out further arrests.

Abductions from schools are rare in Lagos, although kidnapping for ransom by armed criminals is common in southern states.

62 AL candidates

FROM PAGE 16

13 fielded candidates while three parties -- Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (Rob), Bangladesh Islami Front and Bangladesh Kallyan Party -- could not field any candidate.

In the case of small parties, Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD) nominated 29, Workers' Party of Bangladesh (WPB) 23, Jatiya Party (JP-Manju) 17, Bangladesh Nationalist Front (BNF) 7, Communist Party of Bangladesh (CPB) 4, Bikalpa Dhara Bangladesh (BDB) 4, Bangladesh National Awami Party (NAP) 3, Bangladesh Tariqat Federation 1 and Jamiat Ulema-e-Islam Bangladesh 1.

About this, Sakhawat told The Daily Star it reflects that small political parties could not flourish in Bangladesh. Most of them do not have activities at the grassroots level.

Small political parties should beef up their organisational strength and enhance political activities at the grassroots level for the sake of developing democratic culture in Bangladesh, he viewed.

The BNP has no candidates in 119 UPs. The party could not field candidates in 70 UPs and its nominations of candidates were cancelled by returning officers in 49 UPs, according to the statistics of the Election Commission.

Islami Andolon Bangladesh (IAB), however, fielded chairman aspirants in 227 UPs, while the main opposition Jatiya Party (JP) nominated its candidates in 127 UPs.

Burger-minister

FROM PAGE 16

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's 30-member Liberal cabinet, stopped by a downtown Vancouver eatery to sample the burger named in his honour.

"National Deliciousness indeed! Tried my namesake burger at #Vancouver's @TheCannibalCafe and was not disappointed," Sajjan tweeted after eating the burger.

Sajjan, who represents the Vancouver--South, was in town last week for the Liberal government's first ministers meeting, but made time to visit 'The Cannibal Cafe' and try out his namesake burger 'The Minister of National Deliciousness'.

"I approve," Sajjan said after taking the first bite. "It's got pakoras on it. Who would've thought to put it into a burger? Now that -- that makes sense," he was quoted as saying by CIV News.

The chicken burger also features a tandoori-spiced patty doused in butter chicken sauce and pressed yogurt with mint, cilantro and cucumbers.

It was introduced as February's 'Burger of the Month' but the eatery's owner said it was so popular they added it to the regular menu.

Sajjan, who called the experience "very humbling", also shook hands with the chef behind the burger, Zai Kitagawa, and signed off on a chalkboard featuring a drawing of him in sunglasses.

Kitagawa told reporters on Wednesday that he started thinking about the burger shortly after the minister's appointment.

"If there's a man that a Canadian can be proud of, it's definitely Mr Sajjan," he said.

Sajjan is a combat veteran and has served in Bosnia and had three deployments to Kandahar, Afghanistan. He was born in India and moved to Canada with his family when he was five-years-old.

Slovakia's Fico loses majority amid extreme right gains

AFP, Bratislava

Slovakia's leftist Prime Minister Robert Fico said yesterday he would begin difficult coalition talks after he won elections on an anti-refugee platform but lost his parliamentary majority as smaller parties, including the extreme right, scored first-time seats.

A conservative party leader described the outcome as a "big earthquake" in Slovak politics, as analysts cautioned that Fico would struggle to build a governing coalition with a total of eight parties reaching the five per cent threshold to enter parliament.

With 99 per cent of votes counted, Fico's Smer-Social Democrats (Smer-SD) party had 49 seats, down sharply from his comfortable 83-seat majority in the 150 member parliament.

Having earlier dubbed the result a "big mishmash" of parties, Fico announced yesterday morning the start of coalition talks.

"Today we begin the first preliminary negotiations", vowing to "try to assemble a meaningful and stable government."

"It isn't going to be easy. We'll have to do everything to rule out the likelihood of early elections."

The liberal Freedom and Solidarity SaS came second with 21 seats, followed by the conservative OLANO-NOVA which took 19 seats. Its leader Igor Matovic told Slovakia's TASR news agency: "This is a big earthquake."

Building a coalition "could take weeks, even months", political analyst Samuel Abraham told AFP, adding that for Fico to clinch his third term, he would likely "distance himself" from the far right and woo three or four centrist parties like SaS.

The far-right Slovak National Party (SNS) made it back into parliament after a four-year absence with 15 seats.

The extreme right nationalist LS-Nase Slovensko (Our Slovakia) led by Marian Kotleba secured 14 seats to enter parliament for the first time.

"It will be a major disaster at the time when the Slovak Republic will

preside over the European Union to have fascists in our parliament," Smer-SD MEP Monika Flisikova Benova said Saturday.

"Kotleba is a neo-Nazi... Fico used nationalist rhetoric regarding migrants and this strengthened the extreme right in Slovakia," Abraham added.

Another analyst, Abel Ravasz, said "Fico will need at least two to three partners to form a coalition and government."

"The opposition can only form a government if it can gather six centrist and right parties in an alliance".

Fico's strongly anti-refugee policies echo those of other hardliners in the EU's poorer ex-communist east, including Czech President Milos Zeman, Hungarian Premier Viktor Orban and Poland's Jaroslaw Kaczynski.

All have shunned refugees as Europe grapples with its worst migration crisis since World War II.

Fico vowed to "never bring even a single Muslim to Slovakia" and filed a lawsuit against an EU-wide plan to redistribute refugees across the bloc.

As Slovakia prepares to take over the EU presidency in July, Fico starkly warned that "we have reached the point when... Greece is likely to be sacrificed for the sake of Schengen", referring to the 26-nation passport-free travel zone.

Greece has become the major hub for asylum seekers in the EU. Athens shot back, accusing Fico of running "his election campaign with vitriol and human drama" and questioned his ability to lead the EU presidency.

Analyst Ravasz told AFP that Fico missed the mark with his unwavering anti-refugee drive as bread and butter issues like salary hikes for public sector workers came to the fore in the final days of the campaign.

"His favourite topic, the migrant issue lost a lot of momentum in the previous weeks and the new topical issues, namely the protests of teachers and health personnel, were not handled well by Fico."

Another 'missing' bookseller back in Hong Kong: police

AFP, Hong Kong

The second of five "missing" Hong Kong booksellers who was detained on the mainland returned to the city yesterday, authorities said, in a case that has triggered fears of increasing Chinese interference in the semi-autonomous region.

Cheung Chi Ping's return to Hong Kong comes a week after he appeared on Chinese television with four of his colleagues, where some admitted to smuggling illicit literature into the mainland. Cheung had been missing since October.

"Hong Kong Police Force met with Cheung Chi Ping who has returned to Hong Kong from the mainland," the statement issued by Hong Kong's police said.

During the meeting, Cheung requested to have his missing persons case closed and requested his case to be dropped.

"He refused to disclose other

details," the statement added.

His return to Hong Kong follows fellow bookseller Lui Por's arrival in the city Friday. Chinese media said last week Cheung, Lui and colleague Lam Wing Kee would all be released on bail. However, authorities have not been able to confirm when Lam will return to Hong Kong.

The five booksellers from Hong Kong's Mighty Current publishing house, known for its salacious titles critical of Beijing, went missing last year, only to turn up in mainland China.

One who apparently disappeared from Hong Kong, Lee Bo, appeared on television last week and insisted he had not been abducted by mainland authorities.

In the Phoenix TV interview, Lee said he had "resorted to illegal immigration" to get to the mainland as he did not want to draw attention to his visit and that he made the trip so he could cooperate in an investigation.

The light of Joypurhat

FROM PAGE 16

with dreams of owning a solar panel. But for many the prices were out of reach.

"Many villagers walk away empty-handed when they hear the prices," she says.

Likhan decided that at least for some she could do something to help: two years ago on her own initiative she installed solar panels in Khasbatra village of Panchbibi. Subsequently, she installed panels in two neighbouring villages -- Hathatpara and Rasulpur -- as well.

"So far, 148 of the poorest families in the three villages have free connections," says Joypurhat municipality Mayor Mostafizur Rahman Mostaque. "It's courtesy of Meftahul Jannat Likhan."

The system is designed in such a way that from several larger solar plants connections bring electricity to individual residences. "Initially it was enough for a light only, in each home," says Likhan whose thoughts have always centred on students' homework.

Naturally, the villagers who have benefited from her generosity are elated. According to the chairman and local council members who helped install the systems, village children are

reading books more often and with greater enthusiasm thanks to the better illumination.

"We even save on kerosene costs!" laughs householder Rubina of Hathatpara.

The gift of electricity is especially welcome given that for the past 45 years politicians have routinely pledged to connect the area to the Bangladesh Power Development Board's grid, but inevitably failed to deliver.

"Her efforts are well-appreciated," says Joypurhat journalist Momen Moony who visited the villages recently. Nowadays, the three villages are collectively called "Solargram", the solar village, says Moony. It is an initiative Likhan says came from her inner heart, from concern that the children of the poorest families should have fair opportunity to pursue their school careers. "Children can be so demoralised if they are trying to study without electricity," she says. "I hope to provide electricity to more villages in the future!"

But of course even with the brightest solar light, reading cannot proceed without books. To this end, last month, Likhan visited her Solargram with bundles of children's books to be distributed for free.